

Military Order



of the

Loyal Legion

of the



United States



COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPER 39.

Recollections of Burnside's East Tennessee Campaign of 1863.





Military Order of the Boyal Legion

OF THE

United States.



COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPERS.

39

Recollections of Burnside's East Tennessee
Campaign of 1863.

PREPARED BY COMPANION

Brevet Brigadier-General

BYRON M. CUTCHEON,

11

Late U. S. V.,

AND

READ AT THE STATED MEETING OF JANUARY 1, 1902.

revised

non-accepted

E475

.94

.C8

Recollections of Burnside's East Tennessee Campaign of 1863.

During the months of August and September, 1863, Major-General Burnside organized in Kentucky the Army of the Ohio, consisting of the Twenty-third Army Corps and two divisions of the Ninth Army Corps, commanded respectively by Brigadier General Edward Ferrero, of New York, and General Rob't B. Potter, of the same State. The writer was then attached as Major of the Twentieth Michigan Infantry to the second brigade of the first division of the Ninth Army Corps, under the command of Colonel Daniel Leasure, of the One Hundredth Pennsylvania, but afterward commanded by Colonel William Humphrey, of the Second Michigan Volunteer Infantry.

Early in September the troops moved forward from Camp Nelson on the Kentucky river and from Crab Orchard, where the Ninth Corps had been posted, and on the 20th of September our division passed through Cumberland Gap into Tennessee, and on the 22d arrived at Morristown on the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad. It is now well known that the recovery of East Tennessee, one of the most loyal sections of the country, from the hands of the rebels, was one of the most cherished projects of President Lincoln. He had urged that it be undertaken early in 1861, but military conditions did not then render it possible, and he fretted and worried over the delay while other projects were in course of execution, and the military authorities left this most essential link in

the hands of the Confederates, connecting their capital to the great food producing region of the South until late in the autumn of 1863. We finally took it with very little loss when Rosecrans had once seized Chattanooga.

The battles of Chickamauga and Chattanooga were the real contest for the control of the valley of East Tennessee and of the railroad connection between Richmond and the Southwest. It was a source of exceeding rejoicing to President Lincoln when this was done, and East Tennessee from that day remained a solid part of the loyal States. The remaining days of September and the early part of October were spent by our division in movements up and down the Valley of Tennessee, but without important military operations. On the 10th of October the Ninth Army Corps under the personal direction of General Burnside, came in conflict with a division of rebels under Gen. J. S. Williams at Blue Springs, a few miles south of Greenville.

The brief action resulted in the complete rout of the rebel division and their retreat in the direction of Virginia.

Col. John W. Foster, commanding a brigade of cavalry, had been sent to get in the rear of this rebel column in the expectation that we would be able to practically destroy it; but the flanking movement failed, and Gen. Williams and a small brigade, mostly home guards, under Brigadier A. E. Jackson, who was also known by the title of "Mudwall Jackson," escaped to the Mountains of North Carolina.

No further engagement took place between the two sides until near the middle of November. The morning of the 14th of November, 1863, found the two small divisions of the Ninth Corps encamped at Lenoir's Station, some 12 miles northeast of Loudon, on the Tennessee river, and 24 miles southwest of Knoxville. During the night we had been routed

out by the order to stand to arms and prepare to fall back upon Knoxville, in consequence of the report that Gen. Longstreet with his army, having been detached from Bragg at Chattanooga, was about to cross the Tennessee river near Loudon with the intention and expectation of crushing our small force. Gen. Longstreet had under his command three divisions of infantry, together with a large corps of cavalry under the command of Gen. Jos. Wheeler, since famous in the Spanish War. During the morning of the 14th, it was reported that Longstreet was already crossing the Tennessee at Hough's (or Huff's) Ferry, some 4 or 5 miles below Loudon, and that he was moving Wheeler's Cavalry around our right flank in the direction of Kingston, with a view of getting in our rear and cutting off our communications. About noon our division started to march to Hough's Ferry, our brigade then consisting of the Second, Seventeenth and Twentieth Michigan Volunteers, and the One Hundredth Pennsylvania; the latter regiment, however, being detached to convoy a supply train back to Knoxville. Before reaching Loudon we met the column of Gen. Julius White, who, in command of a division of the Twenty-third Army Corps, had been holding Loudon, in full retreat towards Knoxville. Gen. Burnside, who had arrived from Knoxville at about noon, and had taken personal command of the movement, directed Gen. White to face about and march back to Hough's Ferry. It had been raining and the roads were in bad condition. It was nearly dark when we climbed the wooded hills which rise above Hough's Ferry. Longstreet's leading division was already across the river and occupied a small peninsula in a bend of the river, and at that point considerable skirmishing took place that night; but Longstreet was securely posted and held his foothold on the north bank. Before dawn of the 15th, by order from

Gen. Burnside, we suddenly withdrew from our position at Hough's Ferry and began falling back again toward Lenoir. It was reported that during the night he had received orders from Gen. Grant at Chattanooga to fall back to Knoxville. By the middle of the afternoon we had once more reached Lenoir Station, and our entire force was posted in a semi-circular arc around that station as a center. During the afternoon the enemy made his appearance upon the Kingston road and considerable skirmishing ensued. We lay upon our arms that night without food or fire. The men were forbidden to remove their knapsacks or to lie down to sleep, and as a cold, heavy fog settled over our lines towards morning, we shivered through the night. Towards three o'clock of the morning of the 16th, we silently withdrew our lines, excepting the pickets, in the direction of Knoxville. The roads were so bad that the teams had been removed from quite a number of the supply wagons in order to move the artillery, and it became necessary to destroy a small train loaded with rations and ammunition and officers' baggage, in order to prevent their falling into the hands of the enemy. The gray of morning was beginning to break when our second brigade of Ferrero's division took the road in the direction of Campbell's Station. The mud was deep and more wagons had to be abandoned. The men were tired, sleepy, hungry, and well-nigh worn out.

The Confederates were not long in discovering our withdrawal, and we were not more than a mile on the road when they were in motion pressing in pursuit. Our little brigade was the rear guard of the Army of the Ohio with orders to hold the enemy in check and gain as much time as possible for the main body of our troops to get into position at Campbell's Station. Gen. Burnside was personally present and in command. The Seventeenth Michigan Infantry was the rear

guard of the brigade and was the first to come into conflict with the enemy. The first attack came about the middle of the forenoon in front of a small stream, a mile or mile and a half from Campbell's Station, called Turkey Creek. A sharp engagement here ensued, the Seventeenth Michigan suffering quite heavily. Just a little way back of the creek was a dwelling at which Gen. Ferrero and some of his staff had stopped to get a bite of breakfast. Just as the head of our regiment passed this house, Gen. Ferrero came out in haste and as he mounted, said to his staff, "Gentlemen, the ball has opened."

Gen. Ferrero had formerly been a dancing master at West Point.

Now followed one of the prettiest fights in retreat that it was ever my fortune to witness. Col. Humphrey commanding the brigade withdrew his three regiments successively by the Echelon movement until we reached the line of a piece of woods that intervened between us and Campbell's Station. Here a more determined stand was made; the three little regiments, numbering less than 900 men, taking position behind a rail fence which bordered the woodland, the Twentieth in the center, the Second on the right, and the Seventeenth on the left. Up to this point my regiment, the Twentieth Michigan, had been commanded by Col. W. Huntington Smith, with great courage and coolness. As we took our position behind this rail fence, we were both mounted, Col. Smith upon a very large horse, and we sat in the saddle but a few feet in the rear of the firing line, directing and encouraging the men. It was here that Col. Smith fell, his brain pierced by a rebel bullet, dying instantly without a word or groan, and probably never conscious of the fact that he was hit. Instantly the command of the regiment devolved upon me, which command I retained until temporarily retired by a wound at the battle

of Spottsylvania Court House, in May, 1864. Retreating slowly and in perfect order, the brigade passed back through the woods and came out at a point in front of the little village of Campbell's Station. At this time another rebel division was attempting to force its way around our right by way of the Kingston road, which comes in at this point, and thus to interpose between our brigade and the remainder of our forces at Campbell's Station. They were met by our first brigade under General John F. Hartramft and held in check. Our entire division now fell back in perfect order to a point a short distance in advance of the village, and behind the forks of the Kingston and Loudon roads, where we remained until the middle of the afternoon. The Confederates now brought forward their artillery and the action became general. Meanwhile our brigade, which had been engaged for about four hours, was retired to a sheltered position near the Station, having lost 150 out of about 750 men engaged. From this time on the engagement was mostly an artillery duel, although repeated attempts were made to turn both our right and left flank but without success. It was near night when Gen. Burnside withdrew his infantry to the high ground north of Campbell's Station, which position he held until darkness put an end to the conflict. Then began a weary, exhausting and difficult night march to Knoxville, which we reached at day-break on November 17th, completely worn out.

SIEGE OF KNOXVILLE.

Just at the break of day of the 17th of November, 1863, the day following the fight at Campbell's Station, we reached the outskirts of Knoxville, and our brigade was conducted to the ridge to the southwest of the city, known as "White's Hill," upon which stood the unfinished star fort, afterward Chris-

tened and baptised as "Fort Sanders." We were told that we could lie down for an hour. I tied my horse to a post, stripped a board from a fence for a bed, and in two minutes was in a heavy sleep, and slept until awakened perhaps an hour and a half later. I found that the troops were being conducted to position by officers of the engineers, where lines of breastworks had been marked out. In the course of the morning, several hundred civilians were brought out from the city under guard of soldiers and put to work with pick and shovel, digging entrenchments. All soldiers who could be furnished with any kind of tools were also put at work. It was almost marvellous to see how fast the entrenchments and batteries grew. Beginning at the river on the left, they followed the highest crests facing the enemy, and swept around the southwest, west and northwest sides of the town, until they once more reached the river above. Batteries were posted in the most advantageous positions, both on the outer and interior lines; but Fort Sanders was the most prominent, as it was the most important work. The main road to Loudon passed a few rods—perhaps 15 or 20 rods—to the left of the fort, and between this road and the fort was stationed the One Hundredth Pennsylvania, which was not with us at Campbell's Station. In the fort were posted Benjamin's battery "E" of 20-pound Parrott guns; Buckley's Rhode Island battery of brass Napoleon guns, and a part of Roemer's New York battery of small rifled steel guns.

The Twentieth Michigan was posted partly within and partly outside the fort on the right, and then came the Seventeenth Michigan and the Second Michigan, strung along the trenches on our right. Here, on the evening of the 17th, Gen. Burnside rode along the lines with Capt. O. M. Poe, his engineer, who had laid out the work, and inspected and approved our

progress. Toward night the enemy began to make their appearance on the Louden road, and to move along the ridge about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away, toward our right. At that time we expected an immediate attack, but it did not come. General Sanders, with a brigade of cavalry, was holding the Louden road, at the "Armstrong House," which occupied a prominent rise of ground about a mile in front of Fort Sanders. This house was a large fine looking residence with a square brick tower, and was afterward made the headquarters of some Confederate General. Heavy skirmishing went on all the morning of the 18th, while the enemy deployed and got into position for carrying this hill.

From our position in Fort Sanders we were able to witness the whole scene at a distance. We saw the rebels advance from the woods, and saw them repeatedly repulsed; but at length about the middle of the afternoon the Confederate infantry made a determined charge, closing around the hill on which General Sanders was posted, and swept our cavalry back, Sanders being mortally wounded. It was a sorrowful sight to see our brave fellows forced back. This ended the fighting outside the lines of defense. We worked diligently and successfully in strengthening our lines, and putting in new batteries, until by the 20th we felt well prepared for an attack.

After dark on the evening of the 20th of November, the Seventeenth Michigan made a sortie for the purpose of burning a brick house on the Louden road, just below the hill on which Fort Sanders stood, and which had been occupied by the rebel sharpshooters. They went out without being discovered and succeeded in burning the house, but on their return the rebel artillery opened on them, and Lieut. Billingsly was killed and several men wounded. On the morning of the 24th of November the Second Michigan made the most brilliant

sortie of the seige. By this time the Confederates had extended their lines well around us, cutting off our communications on the north side of the river, and now they showed a disposition to close in and tighten their grasp. On the morning of the 24th we discovered that they had extended a rifle-pit from a piece of timber in our front, lying beyond the East Tennessee railroad track—which wound around the foot of the hill on which Fort Sanders stood—into an open field, a distance of about twenty or thirty rods. From that position their sharpshooters were able to pick off men moving inside our breastworks, and to command the embrasures of the fort. General Ferrero determined to dislodge them. He seems to have believed that it was only an advanced post. He directed Col. William Humphrey, commanding our brigade, to send one of his regiments and take the rifle-pit. He selected his own regiment, the Second Michigan. They were quickly up in line behind the breastworks. They passed over the works directly on my right, in columns of fours, and, as Major Byington who commanded, passed me, I asked: "What are you going to do?" He replied: "We are ordered to take that rifle-pit." I said: "I don't envy you the job." These were the last words I ever exchanged with him. The regiment numbered only about 160 muskets. He passed quickly down to the railroad cut at the foot of the hill, moved a little by the left flank and formed a line along the cut. Most of the regiment was in plain view from our breastwork. As soon as the formation was completed in a single two rank line, the word was given, and they went forward on the run. They seemed only a handful, and they began to fall rapidly, from a flank fire from the woods. But they went on gallantly, Byington in front, until they reached the rifle-pit and went over it. But the pit was enfiladed and swept by the flank

fire, and they were compelled to get on the outside again. Some retreated to the railroad, some were captured; but of the 160 who went in the charge, 83 were killed, wounded, or captured. Four officers were killed or mortally wounded and two more were seriously wounded. Byington died in the hands of the enemy. It was the charge at Balaklava over again.

" What though the soldiers knew some one had blundered,
 Theirs not to reason why,
 Theirs not to make reply,
 Theirs but to do and die,"
 Gallant two hundred.

For the time being the regiment was practically wiped out and no one the better for it, for the rebels continued to hold the woods.

The next day, the 25th, was "Thanksgiving Day." The forenoon was rather quiet, but in the afternoon there was a good deal of sharpshooting. In the latter part of the afternoon the Confederates, who had laid a bridge across the river below the town, were attempting to carry a hill upon which we had placed some guns, on the south side of the river. Although it was perhaps a mile and a quarter or more distant from our fort, we could witness the whole movement distinctly, and watched it for a long time. I had retired within my little tent to write a letter, and Capt. W. D. Wiltsie of Co. H. was standing beside my tent still watching the fight across the river, when a sharpshooter, a full half mile away, picked him off. The bullet penetrated his lung, and with a groan he dropped just beside my tent. I assisted in bearing him off and while doing so several more bullets whizzed perilously near to us. He died the second day after. I had known him before the war. He was a graduate of the Law School of Michigan Uni-

versity, and when he enlisted was editing a small paper at Ypsilanti. He was an excellent soldier in every respect—one of the best in the regiment.

The same evening Lt. Col. Comstock, of the Seventeenth Michigan, was picked off in the same manner. I assisted in carrying him from the field and never spoke with him again. He died the same night.

During the 26th and 27th the enemy were posting batteries on the hills on the south side, moving troops to position and preparing generally for the assault which we now expected every night. A part of each regiment slept on its arms; the pickets were strengthened; some buildings that afforded shelter to the enemy were burned, and cotton bales were placed upon the parapets of Fort Sanders, covered with green rawhides of animals slaughtered.

THE ASSAULT ON FORT SANDERS.

The rounded hill on which Fort Sanders stood had once been covered with a growth of timber; here and there a large oak tree, interspersed with a pretty thick growth of small pines. This timber had all been chopped down. The smaller pines had been used for revetments and platforms for the fort, and the branches of the oaks had been cut off and sharpened at the small end, and the larger end set in the ground in a sort of a trench to form an abattis or Chevaux de frise.

The fort which crowned this hill was planned as a "star fort" and was evidently designed by an educated military man. My impression is that it was commenced by the Confederates. If completed it would have been a formidable work. The southeast point toward the river and the Loudon road was well advanced. The southwest star or point was quite complete. The west side was well begun, and the north

and east entirely open. Some of the work was done after we took possession, especially on the east side, which commanded a deep valley extending toward the Holstine river, in front of College Hill, as I remember. The breastwork on the south connected with the southwest corner of the fort and extended toward the river. On the north, the breastwork connected with the northwest angle of the fort and swung away to the northward, following the trend of the hill, toward the railroad station, and then back toward the river above. Just north of the fort were three small lunettes in which were placed a part of Roemer's Battery; I think they were six pounders. Two companies of my regiment were in the northwest angle of the fort, and the other eight companies extended to the right, between, in front of and to the right of Roemer's guns. The armament of the fort consisted of Benjamin's four 20-pound Parrotts, on the south and west angle; four brass guns of the First Rhode Island (Buckley's), on the east front, commanding the valley back of the hill, and the three guns of Roemer's battery in the lunettes before mentioned, facing west. The garrison consisted chiefly of the Seventy-ninth New York, about 100 to 125 men; four companies of the Twenty-ninth Massachusetts, about 80 men; four companies of the Second Michigan, about 60 men; and three companies of the Twentieth Michigan, about 80 men. This was the garrison at the time of the assault on the morning of November 29, 1863, say about 320 to 340 men.

As I have before said, we had been expecting and preparing for an assault since the affair of the 25th, and a part of the men slept on their arms every night, and all stood to arms before the break of day. On the night of the 28th of November, certain ominous preparations attracted our attention, the movements of troops, the planting of batteries, etc. Our

pickets were strengthened and the right of the picket line put out beyond the railroad cut. Certain houses beyond the track which might afford cover for the enemy were prepared for burning, and one-half the men in the trenches ordered to be on the alert. I had not yet lain down when at about 11 o'clock, I think, a sharp firing began all along our skirmish line in front of the fort, and quite a number of our pickets were taken prisoners. The firing lasted for some time on the right, and the buildings which had been prepared for burning were fired, and lighted up the scene brilliantly. The railroad round-house and some other railroad buildings took fire and burned also. A large building west of the railroad in front of the railroad buildings to our right, which had been occupied as an arsenal or ordnance depot by the Confederates, also burned, and the explosions of shells and cartridges sounded like quite a battle. The batteries on the south side of the river opened on us, and the shells fell all around us. By midnight matters had quieted down somewhat, and I sent out Lieutenants Clark S. Wortley, of Co. B, and C. A. Lounsberry, of Co. I, with a new detail of pickets to restore the lines. They made their way down to the railroad, but found the Confederates just on the other side. There was no more sleep that night in our lines, unless the men slept sitting with their guns between their knees. So the night wore away. My position was a little to the right of Roemer's guns, perhaps thirty to forty yards north of the fort, from which point there was an unobstructed view of the west front as far as the salient angle. A deep ditch surrounded this angle of the fort, and outside the ditch a telegraph wire had been run from stump to stump, about knee high, forming three concentric lines of wire, quite irregular in contour. The night was cold, with a little frost. A heavy, white fog hung over all the valleys and at times rose

even to the fort; but in the valley of the river and the deeper hollows between the hills it lay like a sea of milk. Above it rose the fort, the college and the college hill battery, and the highest points of the town.

I was sitting behind the breastwork just as the morning was getting gray, but while objects were still indistinct, knowing that the hour for the assault had come, when from down in the white fog away at the foot of the hill in front of the salient, came the most curious sound of firing that I ever heard, accompanied with more or less yelling. It was not the usual crack-crack-crack of the rifle, but, smothered in the fog, it was just a pip-pip-pip-pip, so slight that it hardly seemed possible that it could be musketry firing at all. Everybody was now alert, and stood to the breastwork; and every eye was turned in the direction of the firing and yelling. Presently out of the fog, which came up two-thirds the height of the hill, there came a line of battle, followed by a second and a third. They came on in column of battalions, battalion front, arms at trail, heads down, no yelling, no cheering; just a sullen, heavy tread, and a low "hep-hep-hep," as they came on at double quick.

Already the fort had opened with shrapnel and canister, but the moment this column showed itself out of the fog the musketry opened from the parapets of the fort and from the breastworks right and left. My entire regiment was posted where they had an oblique flanking fire upon this column, almost without receiving a shot in return, and poured a steady and continuous fire in to front and flank of the attacking party. The ground was strewn thick with those who fell, but still the column came on with grim determination and unfaltering bravery. These were Longstreet's veterans, the flower of the Army of Northern Virginia, three picked brigades

of the same troops who, on the ever memorable 2d of July, 1863, drove Sickles' Third Corps of the Army of the Potomac from the Peach Orchard at Gettysburg.

They were the men who at Chickamauga, on the 20th of September, 1863, had crushed Rosecran's right, and forced it back into Chattanooga.

They had not been accustomed to defeat or repulse. They had made their boasts that they would take breakfast in Knoxville. It was a fine sight to see them come on. They seemed to rise up out of the fog, and came on—a dirty gray mass of brute courage. There was no pausing or faltering, until they struck the telegraph wire—"the tangle" as we called it. The light was still dim and uncertain. I doubt if they saw the wire until they struck it. Then the first line went down in confusion. The next rank, pressing on close behind went down in like manner, and all orderly formation was lost.

Meanwhile both our big guns and musketry were busy getting in their work, and covering the ground with the dead and dying. Through the crackle of the rifles and the thunder of the artillery, we could hear the shouts and curses of the officers, and the shrieks of the wounded. They rose up to stagger on for a few paces, and then go down again. Finally a few hundred of them leaped into the ditch that surrounded the salient. They never got out again. In vain they endeavored to scale the slippery parapet. One man reached the top, and in attempting to plant his flag, he fell dead to the bottom of the ditch. A disorganized crowd still remained outside the ditch, unable to get over and unwilling to retreat. At last all who were able, broke and ran back over the brow of the hill.

During the attack, two companies of the Second Michigan had gone into the ditch on the left and made a number of

prisoners. Capt. C. H. Hodskin of the same regiment leaped upon the parapet and demanded the surrender of those in the ditch. They answered him with yells and with a volley. His clothes were pierced in three places but he was unharmed. Lieut. S. N. Benjamin, commanding the regular battery, called an artilleryman to bring him "some of these 20-pound shells with 5-second fuse." They were brought. Benjamin, taking a brand from the fire that was burning in the fort, stepped to the banquette, lighted the fuse of the shell and threw it over into the ditch, where it exploded. At once there was a chorus of yells and screams, and cries of "we surrender, we surrender." Benjamin was a Vermont Yankee, with a decided "down east" twang; "You surrender, do you?" said he. "Then come in here," and presently they came in, 225 of them, directly past the muzzle of Benjamin's shotted 20-pounder Parrott, and threw their arms in a pile just inside the embrasure. Lieut. Benj. H. Berry, of my regiment, aide to Col. Humphrey, stood there and received them, directed them where to throw their arms, and a guard marched them to the rear. Three rebel battle flags, 700 stands of arms and 225 prisoners were among the trophies. In the midst of the attack I was directed by Col. Humphrey to send a company of the Twentieth Michigan into the salient, and instantly sent Company C, Capt. Geo. C. Barnes commanding, on the double quick, and they assisted in some of the severest fighting. Our loss in the regiment was 19 killed, wounded and missing, nearly one-third of the entire loss on our side. The sight from the front of the Twentieth was fearful. The ground was strewn thick with the dead and dying, and in the ditch they were piled one upon another. As soon as the flag of truce was raised, Gen. Ferrero directed me to take a detail and remove the dead and wounded and deliver them on the picket line to the Confederates. The

ditch at the angle, was piled three deep with the dead and wounded. In some cases we removed the wounded from under the dead. We took them in army blankets, and carried them down to the picket line and turned them over to their friends. It was a sickening sight. Many of them were shot through the head. The Confederate loss, as officially reported, was 129 killed and 458 wounded.

By the time the fighting was over, the fog was all dispelled, the sun had come up brilliantly; the last of the assaulting party had disappeared, and as we ran up the big garrison flag on the staff in the fort, it was greeted with loud and continuous cheers all along the line. The battle was won and East Tennessee was sealed to the Union.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 013 702 503 6